DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 335 UD 034 555

AUTHOR Viadero, Debra; Johnston, Robert C.
TITLE Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanations. The Achievement Gap.
INSTITUTION Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY George Gund Foundation, Cleveland, OH.
PUB DATE 2000-03-22
NOTE 18p.; Theme issue. For other issues in this series, see UD 034 554-557.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.edweek.org/sreports/special reports article.cfm?slug=gap.htm.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT Education Week; v19 n28 Mar 22 2000
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; After School Programs; *Black Students; Class Size; Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; *Hispanic American Students; Korean Americans; Minority Group Children; Parent Influence; *Peer Influence; *Poverty; Teacher Competencies; *Teacher Effectiveness
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; Latinos

ABSTRACT

This second in a four-part series on why academic achievement gaps exist notes that standard explanations for why minority students trail behind non-Hispanic whites are not good enough, suggesting that no single explanation for the gap exists, but instead a multitude of factors are influential. Poverty, though not the single most important cause, is a major contributor. Lack of access to challenging academic courses has a negative effect on minority students. Though peer pressure to not "act white" (achieve academically) does not create achievement gaps, it is an impediment to closing them. Other barriers to achievement include high student mobility, poor teacher quality, parents who do not push their children to achieve, lack of access to preschools, racial stereotyping, academic losses over the summer, low teacher expectations, significant television viewing, and test bias. Students in dire need of good teachers often get the least qualified or least experienced teachers. One solution to this problem may be to raise teacher certification requirements. Korean-American parents typically push their children to achieve, relying on tutors and other supplemental education to eventually win highly competitive college placements. Korean educational values focus on high achievement, afterschool programs, test scores, and homework. (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original document.

ED 458 335

LAGS IN MINORITY ACHIEVEMENT DEFY TRADITIONAL EXPLANATIONS

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

PART TWO OF A FOUR-PART SERIES

EDUCATION WEEK, v. 19 n. 28

March 22, 2000

Debra Viadero and Robert C. Johnston

Editorial Projects in Education

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

K. Dorko

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

UD 034 555

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

EDUCATION WEEK
ON THE WEB
American Education's Online Newspaper of Record

SPECIAL REPORTS

Glossary

Organization Links

Special Reports

Previous Reports & Series

March 2000-April 2000

The Achievement Gap

About 3.4 million students entered kindergarten in U.S. public schools last fall, and already, at the dawn of their educational careers, researchers foresee widely different futures for them. Whether they are white, black, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian-American will, to a large extent, predict their success in school, whether they go to college, and how much money they will earn as adults. Despite decades of attention, gaps in the achievement of minority students remain one of the most pressing problems in education. In this four-part series, *Education Week* asks: Why do achievement gaps persist?

This project is supported in part by a grant from the George Gund Foundation.

Part One: "Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement," March 15, 2000. After decades of school desegregation efforts, during which the gap between blacks and whites closed substantially, progress has stalled. At the same time, the greater diversity of the school population and the rapid growth of the Hispanic population and other ethnic groups have reshaped the problem with a more complex set of issues. Includes:

- "Views Over the Gap";
- "As the U.S. Hispanic Population Soars, Raising Performance Becomes Vital"; and
- "Who Is 'Asian'? Cultural Differences Defy Simple Categories."

Part Two: "Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanations," March 22, 2000. If the researchers studying the reasons why black and Hispanic students continue to trail non-Hispanic whites in academic achievement were pressed to say one thing for certain about their work, it might be this: The usual explanations aren't good enough. Includes:

- "In L.A.'s Koreatown, a Relentless Focus on Schooling."
- "Students in Dire Need of Good Teachers Often Get the Least Qualified or Less Experienced."

Part Three: "Minority Gaps Smaller in Some Pentagon Schools," March 29, 2000. Schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense for children of military families offer lessons on how to raise the achievement of low-income minority students.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Part Four:"Lifting Minority Achievement: Complex Answers," April 5, 2000. The Minority Achievement Committee is Shaker Heights' best-known antidote to the nagging academic achievement gap that separates black and Hispanic students from their white and Asian-American counterparts here and in schools nationwide. Includes:

- "In a Texas District, Test Scores For Minority Students Have Soared."

advertising education week teacher magazine daily news archives special reports
hot topics state info

Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

March 22, 2000

Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanations

By Debra Viadero
Education Week

Second in a four-part series

If the researchers studying the reasons why black and Hispanic students continue to trail non-Hispanic whites in academic achievement were pressed to say one thing for certain about their work, it might be this: The usual explanations aren't good enough.

Poverty can't explain all of the achievement gap, they would say, because grade and test-score disparities crop up even in middle-class communities with integrated schools.

And peer pressure—fears that classmates will accuse fellow minority students of "acting white" for excelling in school—won't do it either. If that were the reason, why would learning differences show up even in kindergarten—when children of every color want nothing more than to please their teachers?

"We know what the causes aren't. We know what we thought were the causes weren't as important as some other things," said Meredith Phillips, a co-editor of *The Black-White Test Score Gap* , a 1998 book on the subject. "And the traditional liberal and conservative explanations don't explain much."

The lack of knowledge is surprising since the gap has been documented since at least the 1960s. Between 1970, when the National Assessment of Educational Progress first began taking the national pulse on student achievement, and 1980, black and Hispanic students made great strides in narrowing the gulf that once separated them from their white peers. But all of that progress seemed to grind to a halt beginning in 1988. Now, African- American and Latino high school seniors on average score at the same level as non-Hispanic white 8th graders on NAEP math and reading tests.

Part I "Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement," *March 15, 2000* : Despite decades of attention, gaps in the achievement of minority students remain one of the most pressing problems in education.

•Part 2 *March 22, 2000* : Why do the achievement gaps persist? Some blame it on teachers; others say parents need to be stronger advocates and cut down on TV time. In a Korean-American community, parents take no chances when it comes to their children's education.

Part 3 *March 29, 2000* : Schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense for children of military families may offer lessons on how to raise the achievement of low-income minority students.

Part 4 *April 5, 2000* : There are no sure answers, but some experts say better teaching, smaller classes, the right schoolwide improvement program, and fairer allocation of resources can shrink achievement gaps. A Houston-area district has some answers of its own.

Coverage of urban education is supported in part by a grant from the George Gund Foundation.

And, most troubling of all, the disparities are greatest at the high end of the achievement spectrum—the statistical pool where the nation's future leaders swim. Failure to close the gap could ultimately mean failure on the part of American society to integrate all of its institutions from the bottom to the top.

"This whole field of looking at achievement gaps has been under-researched because it's politically so touchy," said Ronald F. Ferguson, a Harvard University economist who has

studied the issue. "But by avoiding it, we've done an injustice to African-Americans and other children who might otherwise be achieving at high levels."

To some degree, that avoidance is changing now. What was once a verboten subject has become a top priority for states and school districts nationwide.

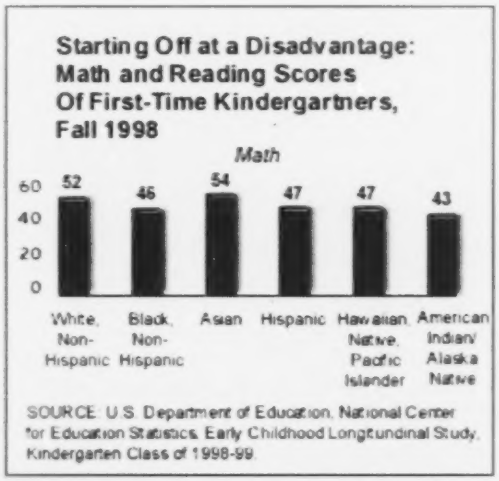
The change of heart has come in part because the nationwide move to institute stricter standards and related tests for students is illuminating some glaring disparities among racial and ethnic groups. Also, the backlash against the affirmative action policies that universities have used to increase minority enrollment has made test-score differences more important than ever. If minority students can't generate scores at least as high as their white counterparts', the door to higher education in several states might conceivably shut in their faces.

"I think a lot of people continued to think things were getting better," said Kati Haycock, the executive director of the Education Trust, a Washington organization that promotes high achievement for all students. "Now, we've seen 10 years of no progress and, in some subjects, a widening of the gap. There's too much evidence to ignore."

In all likelihood, no single explanation for the achievement gap will ever emerge. Experts say a multitude of factors—ranging from parenting practices to peer pressure—can influence academic achievement. The explanations advanced so far for lagging minority performance, some of which are more widely accepted than others, include:

Poverty

Even if poverty isn't the single most important cause of the minority-majority achievement gap, it's a major contributor. Data compiled for the College Board showed that in 1990, Hispanic children were twice as likely as white and Asian-American children to be raised in low-income families. African-Americans were nearly three times as likely to come from poor families.



Growing up poor often means getting inadequate health care and nutrition, having fewer educational resources in the home and in the neighborhood, and moving frequently—all factors known to depress school performance.

What's more, in schools with poverty rates of 25 percent or higher, both poor and better-off youngsters do less well academically. Growing evidence also suggests those schools get less funding than schools in more affluent communities.

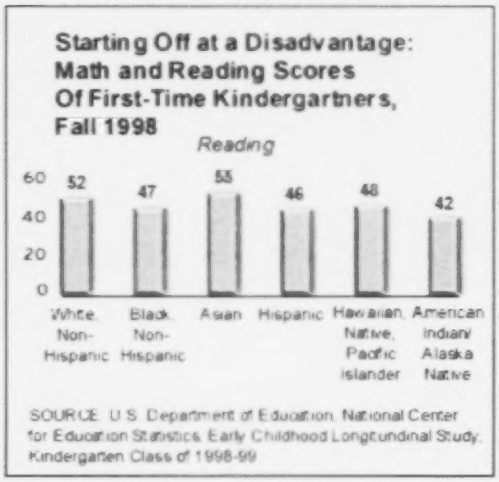
The legacy of poverty can last for generations. Even when two families have the same income levels, chances are the child from the family whose affluence began more recently is worse off educationally.

"It's not only the education of your parents," said David Grissmer, a senior management scientist in Washington for the RAND Corp., a Santa Monica, Calif.- based think tank. "It really does depend on the education of your grandparents, because wealth does accumulate over time."

Academic Coursework

Study after study has shown that disproportionately fewer African-American and Hispanic students than whites take challenging academic courses. The reasons vary. Some schools

rigidly "track" students into such courses, using test scores or previous grades to winnow out those considered less able. Other schools open their tough academic courses to anyone, but minority students choose not to enroll.



"A lot of times, I think blacks are discouraged from being in honors or AP classes because they see no one else in their race in those classes," said Imani Farley, an African- American 10th grader at Shaker Heights High School in Shaker Heights, Ohio. "And sometimes, counselors don't encourage you to challenge yourself."

What's more, the menu of Advanced Placement courses in some urban schools is just not as full as it is in many suburban schools.

Four Los Angeles teenagers, for example, sued the state of California last year, claiming they had been denied equal access to AP courses. Even though they constitute nearly half the student population in California, blacks and Hispanics account for only 13 percent of AP test-takers in that state.

In answer to the problem, some districts are doing away with systems for tracking their students into higher- or lower-level coursework. But experts disagree over whether eliminating high-track classes would do minority students—or anyone else—much good.

New federal research, however, shows that the biggest factor determining whether young people earn bachelor's degrees is participation in a strong academic curriculum in high school. That means Advanced Placement courses, more than three years of English, mathematics beyond Algebra 2, and at least two years of laboratory sciences, foreign languages, and history.

"We should be trying to get more black students to take such classes, not trying to eliminate them as an option for whites, who will respond by sending their children elsewhere," Ms. Phillips and her co-editor, Christopher Jencks, write in their book.

Even more troubling to some are studies suggesting that all the courses in many poor, big-city schools serve up dumbed-down versions of the curriculum taught to students in affluent suburban schools. On national tests, one 1994 federal study found, A students in high-poverty schools scored about the same as C and D students in wealthier schools. Data from NAEP tests in reading and math also indicate that Hispanic and African-American students, compared with their white counterparts, are less likely to be taught reasoning skills and are more likely to be given worksheets—considered a low-level activity—in class.

Peer Pressure

In a widely noted 1986 study, researchers John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham described how a group of low-achieving black students in a District of Columbia high school had come to view academic success as "acting white." Since then, the phenomenon has been widely documented in racially mixed as well as all-black high schools like the one the researchers studied.

But the idea, always controversial, has more recently become the subject of even more heated debate, with some experts contending that the notion may be more of a symptom than a cause of the achievement gap.

"It sounds like a defense mechanism to me," said Roslyn Mack, the mother of two African-American students attending integrated schools in the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights. "It's 'because I'm not doing well, I'm going to make you feel badly because you're doing well.'"

But, Mr. Ferguson of Harvard says, even if that kind of social pressure does not create achievement gaps, it still can be an impediment to closing them up.

High Mobility

It's a well-known fact that student turnover is higher in schools with high concentrations of poor students, immigrants, or children from migrant-worker families. Obviously, it's hard for students to keep up when they move to a new school that may not even use the same textbook. One national study from 1998 suggests that moving even once between 8th and 12th grades can double a student's chances of failing to graduate on time.

But less obvious is the finding that high rates of mobility in a school can also slow the pace of instruction for students who don't move. In one 1996 study of Chicago schools with high student turnover, researchers found that by 5th grade the level of instruction in those schools was almost a year behind that of schools with more stable populations.

Teacher Quality

A growing body of research is beginning to show that students in schools with high concentrations of minority and poor students are more likely to be taught by underqualified teachers.

Those findings are emerging just as other studies are beginning to quantify the damage that an ineffective teacher can do. Research by William L. Sanders and his colleagues at the University of Tennessee suggest that the effects of three consecutive years of bad teachers can linger with students for years.

Parenting

At least half the academic gap between black and white students at the end of 12th grade is attributable to learning differences that are already present when they begin their school careers, said Ms. Phillips, who is also an assistant professor of policy studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

In fact, the U.S. Department of Education released data last month showing that black and Hispanic kindergartners already trailed their white and Asian-American counterparts on tests of general knowledge and early reading and math skills. ("Kindergarten Study Taking Long View," Feb. 23, 2000.)

That suggests to some researchers that parenting practices could be a primary cause of those early differences.

The problem, however, is that researchers know very little about the ways in which parenting practices may—or may not—differ in early childhood.

"I suspect there are systematic differences in the degree to which parents negotiate with their children as toddlers," said Mr. Ferguson of Harvard. "Simply engaging a child in the kind of negotiation that has a child justify a request, or think through something for themselves, or do a calculation has to help."

As children grow older, black parents may also be less likely to push their children to earn better grades or take more challenging courses. In a 1996 study, researchers asked teenagers at nine high schools in Wisconsin and California: "What is the lowest grade you can get without your parents getting upset?" The answers varied by race and parents' educational levels.

Asian-American students whose parents were high school dropouts gave higher grade-level thresholds than white, black, or Hispanic students whose parents had bachelor's degrees.

Black students whose parents were college graduates said their parents had grade standards similar to those of white students whose parents had never attended college.

Experts also point out that, regardless of color, middle- and upper-income parents, tend to take their children to museums more often, to hire tutors when their children are having problems in school, and to pay for test-preparation lessons for college-placement exams.

Preschool

Minority children have less access to good preschool and day-care programs. The New York City-based College Board, in its report "Reaching the Top," notes that only 63 percent of African- American and 36 percent of Hispanic parents with preschool-age youngsters enrolled their children in preschool in 1996.

Even programs such as Head Start, the popular federal preschool program for disadvantaged students, fail to reach large numbers of children who would otherwise qualify. Just as important, some evidence suggests that the preschool programs low-income students do attend tend to offer poorer-quality instruction.

'Stereotype Threat'

In the early 1990s, the Stanford University sociologist Claude M. Steele gave groups of white and black Stanford undergraduates standardized tests. He found that the black students performed worse on the tests when they were asked to identify their race. Mr. Steele theorized that the minority students scored low in those instances because they were anxious about fulfilling negative stereotypes about their own racial group, a phenomenon he tagged "stereotype threat." Once threatened, he said, minority students may go on to "disidentify" with the academic task at hand or to downplay its importance to them.

No one has yet tested that idea in precollegiate classes, but some experts say it could explain why black students are sometimes reluctant to take advanced academic classes and why their average scores are low on some standardized tests.

The 'Summer Effect'

Students from low-income families tend to lose ground academically over the summer, compared with peers who are better off, said Karl Alexander, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Mr. Alexander drew his conclusion from a long-term study of 800 Baltimore students who started 1st grade in 1982. During the school year, he and his colleagues found, poor and more affluent students seemed to learn at the same rate, judging by their scores on tests given in the fall and spring.

But the wealthier students tended to keep on learning over the summer—probably because they are more likely to go to summer camp, visit libraries, or take vacations of longer distances, Mr. Alexander said. The poorer students, in contrast, would tread water academically from June to August.

Over the course of several years, Mr. Alexander points out, slight differences each fall can add up to a significant disadvantage for the lower-income children. "When you add it all together you've got an environment for some children that helps them move ahead compared with an environment for other children that's not as enriching," he said.

Teacher Expectations

Teachers are taught to believe that all children can learn, but their own experiences may sometimes tell them otherwise. As a result, experts and minority parents say that at least some teachers, exposed to low-achieving minority pupils year after year, may come to expect less of

them. They might not hold them to high standards or encourage them to take more advanced classes.

"If you don't expect something, you don't search for it," Mr. Ferguson said.

Research is thin, though, on whether teacher expectations create a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy for minority students.

"My bottom-line conclusion is that teachers' perceptions, expectations, and behaviors probably do help to sustain, and perhaps even to expand, the black-white tests-core gap," writes Mr. Ferguson in *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. But, he adds, "much remains on this research agenda."

Television

During a recent visit by a reporter to Shaker Heights Middle School, students talked about the differences between white students and black students. Brandon Cornelius, a plain-spoken, African- American 8th grader, told of overhearing two sets of girls, one all-white and one all-black, talking in his school. "The white girl, she was saying, 'On weeknights, I can't watch TV at all,'" he said. "Then in the hallway, I heard two black girls talking and saying. 'Did you see what was on TV last night?' " Brandon offered an explanation for the difference: "It's like we want to know what's going on so we can be in the know a little more."

His observation is one that researchers have confirmed. A study of more than 3,000 children released last year found that black and Hispanic children spent an average of three to four hours a day watching television, compared with an average of two hours and 22 minutes a day for white children. ("Report Shows Media Play Enormous Role in Children's Lives," Nov. 24, 1999.)

Test Bias

Are standardized tests inherently biased against African-Americans and other minority groups? Possibly, experts say, but the tests deserve a smaller share of the blame than researchers once thought. The SAT, in fact, has been shown to overpredict how successful African-Americans will be in college.

"If any parent is worried about the tests being biased and then gets a chance to see what's on the tests, most would say, 'This is stuff I would like my kids to know,'" Ms. Phillips of UCLA said.

Genetics

In 1994, a fiercely debated book, *The Bell Curve* , resurrected the explosive suggestion that achievement differences among racial groups stem from genetics. Since then, the notion has been widely refuted by scholars from a range of disciplines.

"If there are genetically determined IQ differences," University of Michigan researcher Richard E. Nisbett writes in *The Black-White Test-Score Gap* , "they are too small to show up with any regularity in studies covering a wide range of populations and using a wide range of methodologies."

Even now, six years after its publication, *The Bell Curve* , written by Charles Murray and the late Richard Herrnstein, casts a shadow over public discussions on the achievement gap. The fear is that all the talk could feed harmful stereotypes about the the nation's minority populations.

That's why it's important to keep in mind that the statistics researchers use to describe the achievement-gap problem are averages, Ms. Phillips stressed. Black, Hispanic, white, and

Asian-American students can be found at the highest levels of academe as well as in General Educational Development classes.

In the end, she said, "focusing on the gap is not necessarily a good thing, unless people act to reduce it." The trick, she and many other experts agree, is to figure out how.

On the Web

Read "America's Next Achievement Test: Closing the Black White Test Score Gap," by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, from *The American Prospect*, September-October 1998.

From the U.S. Department of Education: "Average Reading Proficiency By Grade, Race/Ethnicity, and Reading Proficiency Percentile: 1992 and 1994."

The National Science Foundation is particularly concerned about the achievement gap between whites and minorities in the sciences. See its overview of minority underrepresentation in the sciences, from "Science & Engineering Indicators - 1993."

PHOTOS: Students walk home earlier this year from an elementary school in a poor District of Columbia neighborhood. Experts say poverty contributes to, but is not the only factor in, the persistent low performance of children from some racial and ethnic groups.
—Benjamin Tice Smith
Rasheda Daniel and Jorge Gutierrez are two of four Los Angeles high school students who have filed a lawsuit challenging inequities in access to Advanced Placement courses in California public schools.
—Ken Hively/Los Angeles Times

© 2001 Editorial Projects in Education
Vol. 19, number 28, page 1, 18-22

Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

March 22, 2000

In L.A.'s Koreatown, A Relentless Focus on Schooling

By Robert C. Johnston
Education Week

Los Angeles
The sidewalks in Koreatown are teeming with students leaving school on a Tuesday afternoon. Rather than heading home, though, many of the children are hauling their backpacks to private after-school programs for several more hours of schooling. Those programs, run out of homes, storefronts, and churches, are so popular in the Korean-American community here that the Korean-language phone book lists about 300 of them. Many others are said to operate on a less formal basis.

J. Grace Yoon, the principal of Wilton Place Elementary School, estimates that 80 percent of the Korean-American children in her school attend after-school programs or have tutors. "Most parents want their children to get an education," said Ms. Yoon, who was born in South Korea and immigrated here in the 1974. "But it's not enough to get it in the school."

People here say the practice is imported from Korea, where students rely on tutors and other supplemental education to win highly competitive spots in college. In the United States, the programs meet parental demands for a flexible, academically centered day care. "It's part of the cultural identity of this town," said Lloyd J. Houske, the principal of Cahuenga Elementary School in this tightly knit community near the center of the city. "There's shopping and tutoring."

While the population of this four-square-mile neighborhood is about 50 percent Hispanic, there is no comparable educational network run by and for Hispanics. And with Korean children typically outperforming their Hispanic classmates here, some say the after-school model—and the relentless focus on education that pervades the Korean-American community—offer strong lessons for those seeking to raise the academic performance of other minority groups.

"It's like an ambience of learning that says education is important," said Eugene H. Cota-Robles, a professor emeritus of biology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a co-chairman of the College Board's National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, which sponsored a research project on the after-school programs. "The Latino community could learn a lot about that ambience."

'The Only Variable'

People of Korean ancestry make up about 10 percent of California's roughly 4-million-strong Asian community, which in turn accounts for some 11 percent of the state's population.

Koreatown has been the largest Korean community in the United States since its distinct ethnic flavor began taking hold in the early 1900s. Today, following a four-decade influx of Korean immigrants that began with changes in federal immigration laws in 1965, Koreatown covers several city blocks and is home to thousands of Korean-Americans. Many more come here daily to work, shop, and socialize.

The 1990 U.S. Census found that among Koreans age 25 or older, 55 percent had some college education, slightly ahead of the Asian-American and the U.S. populations as a whole, and most had held white-collar jobs in Korea before emigrating.

Such backgrounds would seem to preordain their children to academic success. On the other hand, Korean immigrants struggle with language differences and rarely hold the same white-collar jobs here. Still, Korean parents here maintain their deep reverence for education. In addition to being a cornerstone of centuries-old Confucian values, strong schooling historically has helped Koreans rise from the lower classes in their native country by preparing them for the exams needed to qualify for respected government jobs.

"Education is the only variable for success," Ms. Yoon said. "If you are not educated, you are nobody."

Kyeyoung Park, an anthropology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, agreed. She noted that that many Korean-American parents are especially fond of Ivy League schools. "I've even had a student named Princeton Kim," she said.

'Strong Trees'

Ms. Yoon says the popular after-school programs almost certainly contribute to the differences in performance between her Asian students, most of whom are Korean-American, and her Hispanic students.

For example, 22 percent of the school's Hispanic students scored above the national mean in 1998-99 on the Stanford Achievement Test-9th Edition, while 73 percent of Asians scored above the mean.

Though Ms. Yoon is often asked by Korean parents to recommend the best after-school programs, she refuses to do so in order to avoid conflicts of interest. There are plenty of candidates, however.

For example, less than a mile away is the Morning Star Nursery & Preschool, which was started 15 years ago by Yong Cha Ra, a former teacher's aide at Wilton Place Elementary, on the bottom floor of her two-story house.

Her enrollment has quintupled, from 10 students the first year to 50 this year. She provides transportation for elementary school students who come after their regular day. The students can stay till 6:30 p.m., receiving help on their homework, in English, as well as the chance to practice on the two pianos and 10 computers. The cost ranges from $250 to $350 a month.

"Parents think there's not enough in the public school—that's why they send them to me," Ms. Ra said.

A few blocks away, Jung Hwa Ree, who teaches child development at Los Angeles City College, operates the Wilshire Smiling Tree School, which has about 150 preschool and elementary pupils. The curious name is a metaphor for children, she says: "When tree roots are good, they will grow up to be strong trees."

Her school would not be popular as a day-care alternative with the Korean parents if it did not have an academic focus and assignments were not taught in English. "Korean parents want more than play for their kids," Ms. Ree said. And while she has television sets at the school, the students watch it for just one hour on Friday afternoon as a treat. "Parents like that," she added. "No TV!"

It wouldn't be fair, however, to say that her school is all work and no play. Ms. Ree, a mother of two who came to the United States from South Korea in 1973, goes to great lengths to create a lively and engaging atmosphere. The two-story walls around the converted home

that houses the school are decorated with colorful murals of astronauts and seascapes.

Classes are small. And she has converted a former fishing boat into a favorite playground toy for the children.

"I don't like to play all day or push too much, so I've tried to figure out what's best for the kids," she said. "Scores are important, but play is also important."

Scoring Points

Scores are more important, though, at the six Elite Educational Inc. sites around Los Angeles. Serving primarily high school students, Elite charges about $300 for four-week test-preparation, academic enrichment, and college-planning courses.

The company's brochures publish the names and scores of some of its star pupils, several of whom have posted perfect scores of 1600 on the SAT.

"We can make a drastic improvement, and we have the numbers to prove it," said Kevin K. Sung, the executive director of Elite Educational.

The company's site in Koreatown operates from the second story of a small office complex on bustling Wilshire Boulevard. The offices and classrooms are clean and neat, but sparsely decorated. Distractions are minimal.

Mr. Sung said that despite the volume of supplemental education programs in the area, he doubts that the market is saturated. Indeed, he would like to see such opportunities expanded to other ethnic neighborhoods.

"The most important thing is that other groups need more information on tests and college. We in the Asian community are tapping into that," he said. "If average kids are not exposed to these extra things and higher expectations, there would be no difference for them."

There are also programs for students who cannot afford the fees that the private programs charge. The Korean Youth and Community Center, an independent nonprofit community service agency, provides after- school homework supervision and enrichment programs for several dozen students at its two-story building here, as well as at local schools.

Soojung Young, the program director, said that her tutors, most of whom are local college students, review report cards, test scores, and notes from teachers to tailor one-on-one instruction for each student.

Homework, Please

The youngsters clearly enjoy their college tutors, who gently prod them to fill in worksheets or calculate a multiplication problem. Taking a break from her work with a young boy, Deborah Shin, a Korean-American sophomore at UCLA who is studying political science and history, said, "I can't imagine not helping the community."

The after-school programs do more than help students get good grades. Korean parents here use them to build their children's credentials so that they can qualify for prized spots in the city's respected magnet school program, or win acceptance to a private school, for those who can afford it.

Asian students make up 4 percent of the Los Angeles school district's nearly 700,000 students, but represent 12 percent of all students who attend its magnet schools, admission to which can be highly competitive. In contrast, Hispanics make up 70 percent of the district's total enrollment, but only 37 percent of the magnet school students.

"Most Korean parents want their child in magnet schools," said Soo Young Nam, the mother

of a 1st grader at Wilton Place Elementary. "If they can't move to another city [for better schools], they look for magnet schools."

While all this aggressive parenting is generally seen as a good thing, educators here acknowledge that there is a downside.

Ms. Young often feels compelled to tell parents that it is OK if their children don't want to attend Ivy League schools, and that forcing children to live their parents' dreams can cause problems.

"Some Korean immigrant parents are not happy if the teachers don't give their children enough homework," added Ms. Park of UCLA. "They protest."

Still, local families invest a great deal of pride in their children's accomplishments. One of the community's highlights comes in May, when the local Korean-language newspaper begins publishing student names, their test scores, and the colleges they plan to attend.

Mr. Cota-Robles agrees that any parent can overdo it. On the other hand, he said, many Hispanic and African-American children could benefit from a similar communitywide focus.

"If it gives kids more confidence in their skills, that's good," said Mr. Cota-Robles, who hopes to get a national Hispanic advocacy group to open an academic "outpost" in Koreatown. Besides, he added, maybe it's time to start looking at the time that children spend in groups working on school assignments as simultaneously balancing their academic and social needs. "That can be done," he said.

On the Web

Read about the National Asian Family/School Partnership from the National Coalition of Advocates for Students. Their resource, School Information for Asian American Families, provides information and tips for Asian-American parents on becoming more involved in their children's education and helping their children succeed in American schools.

Asian-American Children: What Teachers Should Know. This digest from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education strives to provides information that will promote a better understanding of Asian-American children, particularly those from East and Southeast Asian cultures, and identify culturally appropriate educational practices to use with those children.

Read a brief summary of Korean- American history from Anthropology Explorer.

PHOTOS: Kevin K. Sung, above, is the executive director of Elite Educational Inc., which offers test-preparation programs and other services to Los Angeles-area students.
Jung Hwa Ree, left, operates the Wilshire Smiling Tree School, an after-school facility that serves about 150 preschool and elementary pupils.
Daniel Synn, 8, works on his homework at the Korean Youth Community Center.
—Mel Melcon

© 2001 Editorial Projects in Education Vol. 19, number 28, page 20-21

Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

March 22, 2000

Students in Dire Need of Good Teachers Often Get the Least Qualified Or Less Experienced

By Debra Viadero
Education Week

One way to shrink the academic gap might be to make sure that every minority student gets a good teacher.

A growing body of research suggests that those students who, arguably, most need the best teachers are getting just the opposite. By and large, the studies say, poor and minority students have a disproportionate share of poor-quality or unqualified teachers.

The disparities can be striking. In the New York City schools, for example, the percentage of teachers who have failed national teacher-certification exams is three times higher than it is elsewhere in the state. Similar patterns show up in Texas and Tennessee.

Even in racially mixed schools, it's often common practice to reward senior or better-qualified teachers with the most advanced courses—classes that typically have disproportionately fewer minority students.

"It's clear that if we want to close the gap, we could do it in a short period of time if African-American kids were systematically taught by our best teachers," argued Kati Haycock, the executive director of the Education Trust, a Washington group that promotes challenging coursework for all students.

The trouble is that achieving that goal is a politically combustible, hugely complicated task—and one that may even work against some other remedies proposed for improving minority achievement.

Recruiting better teachers to hard-to-staff urban schools might mean redistributing qualified teachers or prodding teachers' unions to relent on longstanding policies advocating equal pay for equal work.

But the problem of differing academic outcomes has become so pressing that even the unions are taking a second look at the matter.

"We are ready to tackle some of these tough issues," said Segun C. Eubanks, a senior professional associate in charge of teacher recruitment and retention issues for the National Education Association. "We believe every teacher who teaches our students should be fully qualified."

Class Size vs. Teacher Quality

Never has the importance of top-quality teaching been more clear than now, as schools nationwide gear up to hire an estimated 2 million more teachers over the next decade. If states and districts follow through on their efforts to raise the bar for teachers entering the profession, the competition for qualified teachers is likely to become intense.

While all students suffer when they have a second-rate teacher, the problem gets more complex when viewed in the context of the achievement gap between minority and white students.

For example, efforts to raise standards for teachers potentially conflict with another common strategy for improving minority achievement: reducing class sizes in schools with large minority populations.

In Tennessee, which in the 1980s launched the largest experiment to date on reducing class sizes in the early grades, researchers found that all students learned more when taught in classes of 15 to 17 students.

But black students benefit even more. After kindergarten, the learning gains African-American students made were typically twice as high as they were for white students. Improvements were even more dramatic for black students in inner-city schools.

But when California tried in the mid-1990s to reduce class sizes in the early grades on a massive, statewide scale, the result was a big increase in the number of people hired to teach in urban schools who had only "emergency" credentials. In many cases, better-qualified teachers had been lured away to higher-paying, more desirable jobs in suburban schools, which were also scrambling to qualify for the state class-size-reduction money.

"Those are two policy goals that contradict one another in practice, and we really don't know from the research which matters more," said Meredith Phillips, the co-editor, with Christopher Jencks, of *The Black-White Achievement Gap* , a 1998 book that explores the problem of disparate academic performance.

Another problem: Raising teacher-certification requirements might further shrink an already-small pool of minority teachers. African-Americans constitute 15.5 percent of the K-12 population in the nation's schools, but only 6.8 percent of the teaching force. The proportions are much the same for Hispanic children and teachers.

Increasing the supply of such teachers has long been a goal for districts and schools of education. The hope is that those teachers will be role models for minority students, and that they will teach in ways that are culturally compatible with students from their own racial or ethnic groups.

"I feel different when I have a black honors teacher, like I do in math," said Courtney Conwell, an African-American 8th grader at Shaker Heights Middle School in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a racially mixed suburb of Cleveland. "I feel more comfortable."

But do minority students really learn more with a teacher who looks and talks like them? The research is mixed on that question, according to Ronald F. Ferguson, a Harvard University economist who has reviewed such work. Some studies suggest that it helps; others show no effect.

In one study of nearly 800 Baltimore schoolchildren, for example, Johns Hopkins University researchers found that a teacher's social class was just as important as race. In that study, the teachers who produced the best results with African-American students were black teachers from poorer family backgrounds and white teachers from more affluent families.

Defining 'Good' Teachers

"I think we do need more minority teachers, but I don't think that's the critical issue," said Mr. Ferguson, who is African-American. The relevant question, he believes, is whether students will be better off if states raise their teacher-certification requirements. "I think the answer is yes," he said.

Mr. Eubanks of the NEA argues, however, that educators shouldn't have to choose between

lesser evils.

"What we have found is that there is a pool of capable people of color who are willing to teach in hard-to-staff schools," he said. "It's just a matter of how you recruit them and support them." Too many districts, he said, use shortcuts to bring teachers in on "emergency" teaching credentials or through alternative-certification routes.

Scholars increasingly agree that having an effective teacher of any color is vital to a child's learning progress. In Tennessee, for example, where researchers have been using sophisticated "value added" methodology to analyze student scores on state exams, studies have found that the effects of a good—or bad—teacher can linger for years. In that research, 5th graders who had had for three years in a row teachers the study ranked as highly effective scored above the 80th percentile on state reading and mathematics tests. Conversely, 5th graders with three consecutive years of ineffective teachers scored below the 50th percentile.

What social science hasn't yet figured out is how to determine who the good would-be teachers are. According to Mr. Ferguson, studies so far show that teachers with degrees from better colleges or with higher scores on standardized tests seem to have the edge. But more years of teaching experience do not automatically translate into higher student achievement.

"The definition of 'excellent' has to be thought through carefully," said Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, a professor of urban education at Emory University in Atlanta. "Some teachers, even though they have high test scores, cannot teach specific content to specific kids."

She said teachers of minority children must also, for example, be able to draw on their students' prior knowledge and to link it to the concepts they are trying to get across. One way education schools can produce teachers with that skill, she said, is to provide them with internships that take them beyond the school walls and into the neighborhoods, churches, temples, and mosques of their students.

Schools in El Paso, Texas, meanwhile, succeeded in narrowing academic differences between student racial and ethnic groups—and in raising achievement overall—by improving the skills of the district's existing, largely home-grown teaching force. Partnering with a local university, school officials began summer and monthly training sessions and mentoring programs for teachers.

And as important as a teacher's instructional skills, most of the experts, parents, and students interviewed in recent weeks agreed, is the belief among teachers that every student, regardless of skin color, can achieve at high levels.

"When you first encounter a low-performing kid, it's hard to imagine this kid will not always be low-performing," said Ms. Phillips, also an assistant professor of policy and sociology studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. "We have to help teachers understand that kids' skills are malleable."

PHOTOS: Kati Haycock of the Education Trust argues that minority students need the best teachers.
—Benjamin Tice Smith

© 2001 Editorial Projects in Education
Vol. 19, number 28, page 18-19